

Sign 2 - A Life-Giving Word

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder, what is it that draws you to Jesus? We have spent some weeks now as a church together going through John's gospel and seeing more of Jesus for who he truly is.

And so far, as Jesus has revealed himself, we have seen lots and lots of people drawn to him. Think back, if you can, to the first disciples who we saw drawn to Jesus by the eyewitness testimony that they heard about him.

Here is the one who takes away sins and who gives the Holy Spirit. And then Nathaniel, who we saw was drawn to Jesus, even with his doubts and his questions, to find out if this really was the promised one who the scriptures speak about, who the prophecies all point to.

And then others, he was drawn to him when they saw his first sign at Cana, at the wedding, his turning the water into the very best wine, a sign and a taste of the kingdom that he is bringing. And then lots and lots of people drawn to him for all the signs that he did in Jerusalem, including, of course, Nicodemus. And finally, the woman at the well in Samaria, drawn to the one who she said could tell her everything she had ever done.

[1 : 38] And the village of her friends and neighbors and family, he were drawn to him by her words and then ultimately by his words. So many have been drawn to Jesus as he has pulled back the curtain to show us who he truly is.

And I hope we are beginning to see that there is indeed no one like him. There is no one so full of such grace and truth and power.

And in fact, so far in this gospel, no one has anything bad to say about him. No one is against him. But the question is, has everyone truly understood him?

Does everyone really get who he is? Why he came? What he's here for? Yes, they trust him. But what do they trust him to do?

Yes, they believe him. But who do they believe he is? Our passage this morning wraps up this part of John's tour.

[2 : 47] If you like, notice Jesus came from Cana in Galilee in chapter 2, verse 1. He went down to Judea. He's come back up through Samaria. And now, chapter 4, verse 46, he's arrived back in Cana.

So literally, John has brought us full circle. And so, this is a good time for him to ask us the question, after all he's shown us of Jesus so far, well, do we really know him yet?

Have we understood who he is and what he's here for? If we're drawn to Jesus or we're being drawn to Jesus, are we drawn to the real Jesus?

If we're trusting in him or learning to trust in him, well, do we trust him for what he really came to do? These are searching questions, but questions that Jesus helps us with.

He helps us to come to him rightly as we see him in this passage. And he does that firstly by helping us to recognize false faith. To recognize false faith.

[4 : 03] Our passage begins with a party, doesn't it? Jesus welcomed home to Galilee. You will see in verse 45, the Galileans welcomed him.

They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, for they also had been there. So he's home and he's become a bit of a local celebrity.

You can imagine getting home from the Passover that year and telling their friends, we saw a man do incredible things. Signs and wonders, things that we had never seen before.

And you'll never guess what. He's from just around the corner in Nazareth, from our region of Galilee. Word spreads, news gets around, he's coming back.

And so as he steps off the plane in Nazareth International, the cameras flash. The paparazzi follow him across the runway, looking for a quote for the following morning's Galilee Gazette.

[5 : 05] A crowd waits for him in arrivals, holding signs and banners. Welcome home, Messiah. How does Jesus react to this welcome?

Well, he passes through the crowds, verse 46. Gets straight in his car and heads to Cana. At the town where we read, he had turned the water into wine.

In short, he has no reaction whatsoever. There's a buzz throughout the whole region. The people of Galilee welcome Jesus.

They're glad to have him back with them. But what does Jesus think of this response? We'll see his verdict there in verse 44. For Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country.

Hmm. No honor. Are you sure, Jesus? No honor? Have you seen the welcome party that they are throwing for you? But clearly that is not the kind of honor that he's after.

[6 : 18] Clearly that is not the kind of belief he's come for. What does Jesus know that we don't know? Well, he sees the heart.

Yes, the crowds had been and seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover. But turn back with me if you have your Bible open to chapter 2 in verse 23. What did Jesus think at the time about this very same crowd?

While he was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.

He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person. They saw the signs. They saw the wonders.

They seemed to believe. But Jesus knew better than to give himself fully to them because he sees their hearts. They were not truly his.

[7 : 24] He was not truly theirs. And now these same people are throwing him a welcome home party. And Jesus knows better than to believe that their welcome is wholehearted or sincere.

How can we tell this kind of belief is false belief? Perhaps this is a question that you struggle with yourself. You believe, but sometimes you wonder, well, is my faith real, genuine faith?

Well, this is a great opportunity for us together to find confidence and rest in Christ as we see the real difference between false and true faith.

Because in Cana, where Jesus goes, we're introduced to one man who starts with false faith and ends with true faith.

Look with me at verse 47. There was a certain royal official whose son lay ill at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son who was close to death.

[8 : 41] It's a tragic sight, isn't it? A father with a dying son. Picture his desperation. Perhaps he's heard the rumors.

Perhaps he's seen the signs. The doctors have run out of options. He's spent vast sums of money on treatments that haven't worked. He is totally helpless, without answers.

And then Jesus comes home. And in faith and fear and desperation, this high-flying royal official runs to beg at the feet of the one true king.

Lord, he says, come down before my son dies. Let's not brush over the belief that brought him there to begin with. He clearly believes that Jesus is kind enough to come.

He clearly believes Jesus is powerful enough to help and to heal his son and give life. He believes Jesus is something. But what does he believe Jesus is?

[9 : 47] Look at Jesus' answer in verse 48. He says, unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe.

Perhaps that sounds unhelpful or unsympathetic. We wouldn't usually respond to someone's desperate need with a big theological question, would we?

If we think Jesus is being a bit heavy-handed here, well, the spoiler is that he does indeed give life to the dying boy. But the question isn't really whether or not he can give life to the dying, or whether or not he is a wonder worker.

He can. And he is. The question is whether that is all he is. Whether that is all he came to do. See, this man and the crowds who welcomed him have seen the signs, but they haven't gotten past the signs.

See, if you were to stand at the signs outside that say Bon Accord, but you don't follow the signs in and come in, then you haven't really arrived at the destination.

[11 : 02] Okay, you could argue, well, I have come to Bon Accord. I'm standing by the sign. But we all know that you're not meant to stop by the sign, but to follow it to where it points.

The fact that we're all sitting here this morning suggests that we all understand how a sign works. Well, this man saw the signs. He saw the wonders.

But that is where he had stopped. He hadn't seen what was written all over the signs and the wonders, that this man is the Christ, the Son of God, come to give life in all its fullness.

Not simply a few more years added on, or better life here and now, but eternal life, unending life in all of its fullness.

So he comes to Jesus and he asks for a one-off, here and now wonder. And yes, that took faith. But faith only went as far as his urgent need in that moment, at that point in his life.

[12 : 13] Yes, he believes in Jesus as a wonder worker, but not yet as the Christ. Yes, he can have his son back from the point of death, but he doesn't yet have the life that Jesus came to give.

Yes, it's faith, but it's false faith, because it doesn't yet bring him to rest in Jesus as his saving and life-giving king.

I wonder what is it that draws ye to Jesus? There could be any number of things, perhaps at his power to meet your needs here and now, or perhaps his kindness in coming to be with ye in dark and difficult times.

But how often do we come to him only when we feel we need him, when we have a problem right now that we can't fix? What is it that we come to Jesus for?

Friends, Jesus is powerful to help us and to heal us, and he is kind to be with us, and he is gracious to forgive us.

[13 : 35] But those are simply things that he can do for us, not who he is, who he came to be for us. Do we come to him as the Christ, the king who came to rule our lives, the son of God who came to take our sin and to give us unending life with God forever?

In short, do you come to Jesus as a wonder worker only, or for all that he truly is, the son of God, the savior of the world?

I wonder, is it possible that some of us are still standing by the signs this morning and are yet to follow them all the way to Christ himself?

Perhaps you're not asking for a miracle as such, but we all come with requests, don't we? Perhaps just now you're asking the Lord Jesus for health, or for strength, or for money, or for time, or for the needs of those who we love.

Perhaps there's nothing that we long for more than not to lose those who are close to us. That's what's so heart-wrenching about this passage in John's Gospel, isn't it?

[14 : 55] There's something so human about this man's fear and desperation to stop the death of his son from happening. I had a conversation with a neighbor of ours in Edinburgh before we moved away.

At one point, he told me in a long conversation that he wasn't afraid of dying himself. But what he was afraid of was what would happen to his family if he died.

See, death is the problem, isn't it? Of all the problems that we have in our lives, death is the ultimate problem because it can't be solved.

We are helpless in the face of death. And so the idea of death should send us running desperately to Jesus. But not only to ask for a few more years.

Not only to ask for the healing of those whom we love. Not only for us to ask for a better quality of life here and now. But to ask Jesus for his gift of eternal life.

[16 : 04] To trust him not only to fix our lives here and now. But to take our sin and our death and be our king and give us life forever. That's what this sign says.

That is where it is pointing. That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And that by believing in him, we may have eternal life forever in his name.

And so secondly then, let's see how Jesus helps us to follow that sign all the way and to respond to him in true faith. Respond in true faith.

Would you read with me again from verse 49? The royal official said, Sarah, come down before my child dies. Go, Jesus replied.

Your son will live. The father makes his request. And notice that Jesus says yes and no. Did you notice that?

[17 : 04] It's not a straightforward answer, is it? Jesus says yes to saving his son from dying, but no to coming down himself to do it. Why didn't Jesus go?

Well, maybe he thought he could save himself a journey. Or perhaps a distance healing is more impressive than an in-person healing. It could be.

But my hunch is that Jesus' motive isn't laziness or self-promotion. Instead, what he chooses to do is a sign that no one gets to see so that no one gets to see it.

Remember, he's just pointed out his people's over-dependence on signs and wonders to cling to when they come to him. He said, didn't he, unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe.

So to help this man get from trusting in the signs to trusting in the Savior himself, well, he separates the sign from the seeing.

[18 : 10] To put it this way, he's taken away the distraction of this man having to see his son given life from the dead. So now all this father has to go on is Jesus' word.

There's no sign to see, only a promise that his son would live. And wonderfully, verse 50, the man took Jesus at his word and departed.

Literally, John writes, he believed Jesus' word. So already we see this man's faith shifting away from the visible power of a one-hit wonder to the invisible trustworthiness of Jesus and his promise. In the end, a word is all that Jesus leaves him with. But wonderfully, gloriously, his word is absolutely trustworthy and true.

Because read with me what the outcome was from verse 51. While he was still on the way, the man's servants met him with the news that his boy was living.

[19 : 18] When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, yesterday at one in the afternoon, the fever left him. Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, your son will live.

Picture that moment, that moment, that moment where the penny dropped. My son was dying. Now my son is living because Jesus said he would.

See, the incredible thing about this miracle isn't how big or impressive it is. It's not even the most impressive thing that happens in this gospel. In fact, people other than Jesus do more impressive things than this in the Bible.

The thing we're meant to sit up and take notice of is where this power comes from. Compare it, for example, with a miracle we see in the Old Testament.

Way back in 2 Kings chapter 4, a prophet called Elisha brings a child who has died back to life. But he not only had to be physically there to do it, we read, he lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands.

[20 : 43] It's such a bizarre and difficult miracle to perform. But if anything, it only stressed that the power was not coming from the man himself, but from God.

By contrast, how does Jesus raise the dead and dying? He doesn't need to touch. He doesn't even need to be there.

He simply says the word, your son will live. And he lived. And as the father works back in his head, it was that exact moment that the words left Jesus' mouth that his son was brought to life.

So then, where does this power come from? Well, it is in the word of Jesus himself. His word is the word that first gave life.

He is the word through whom all things came into being. And now he speaks the word and brings the dying immediately and effortlessly back to life.

[21 : 52] Put it this way, what would this father have replayed over and over and over in his head in the weeks and months and years that followed?

Not the sight of a spectacular miracle. Not a sign, not a wonder, but the sound of Jesus' voice.

Do you think this man ever forgot the sound of the words as they left Jesus' lips? Your son will live.

And so, having believed Jesus, taken him at his word, verse 53, this one man believed, and now he and his whole household believe.

Those who had not seen a sign, those who had not even heard a sound, they now believe in Jesus as the one who gives life with a word.

John is telling us they followed the sign all the way to where it pointed and came to rest in Jesus himself as they put their faith in him. So, how do we know whether our faith is real, true, living faith?

[23 : 10] Well, to put it this way, true faith is faith not only in what Jesus can do for us as a wonder worker, but faith in who Jesus is for us as our life-giving king and our sin-bearing savior.

Jesus may or may not give us signs, he may or may not do wonders in our lives, but what he is for us, he is always for all who trust him, who take him at his word, a sin-bearing savior, a life-giving king.

That is who this sign says he is. Death is a universal reality and a reminder of what has gone wrong in our world since humanity first turned against God.

Death is a scar on our human condition that does not go away. But when Jesus came, he came to take away that reminder of our rebellion by taking away the root of our rebellion.

He would shoulder our sins on the cross. He would die for the dying. He would suffer God's wrath for sinners and he would overcome death in his resurrection to give life to those who had sinned, to us who should rightly die for our sins, to give us eternal life with God forever.

[24 : 49] See, in the end, the giving of life to this dying child, the giving of this son back to his father, would cost the father his one and only son, as Jesus himself would give his life to save the dead.

So this child's life from the dead is a sign of the new life that Jesus came to give as the Christ, a world where death is powerless because sin is defeated and life is full and eternal for all who believe in him, the savior of the world.

And so if today you have not yet put your faith in him, let me urge you not to stop and wait by the signs, not simply to hope in Jesus power or not simply to cling to his care and compassion, but to trust in Jesus as our rescuer, the one who came to save us, to take away death, to give us life forever.

If your faith is in him today, let me urge you to stand in awe of him, this man who gives life with a word. Yes, thank him, thank him for another day, another day to know him and walk with him and worship him, but thank him all the more for an eternity of days to worship, to love, and to walk with him.

It's no accident as we come to the end of this section of John's gospel that we find Jesus speak and give life to the dying, because at the end of the next section of this gospel, we will see Jesus speak again, and this time give life to the dead.

[26 : 37] Jesus' friend, Lazarus, who had died, will walk out of his grave alive at the sound of Jesus' voice. And of course, the whole gospel will close with a still more powerful, a still more cataclysmic resurrection, as Jesus himself will rise from the dead after three days.

Jesus, he laid down his life only to take it up again. He died, but he rose again, and he lives so that any of us who trust in him will not die, but would have eternal life.

Because when we take Jesus at his word, he becomes our life-giving king, our sin-bearing savior, who gives us life that never ends. John writes in chapter 20, Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book, but these ones are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

He is here held out to us today, to all who would take him at his word. And receive his gift of life. Will you take him today as your savior and king?

Let's pray together. God, our Father, we thank you for your grace in sending your Son into a world so broken by sin, into a world under the curse of death.

[28 : 22] We thank you for this one who, with a word, gives life. And we pray, our Father, that by his word today he would give life to us. We pray, give us faith and help our unbelief that we might take him at his word, that we might believe that he indeed is the Christ, that we might come to him not only for our daily needs, but for our great and eternal need, to be right with you and to live with you forever.

Help us, we pray, draw people many to yourself and draw us all nearer to Christ, we ask in his name. Amen. Amen. We are going to close.